A Memorial
of the late
Hon. John Wells.

Read before the Brooklyn Thursday Club, Jan 6, 1876

It very seldom happens that one is able to read after the lapse of some little time, the impressions of popular feeling, called out by the death of a man in public life, without being made painfully aware of an over-estimate placed upon his life and services. So groundless as applied to this present time – is the complaint which Shakespeare puts into the mouth of Mark Antony,

"The evil that men do lives after them
"The good is oft interred with their bones,"

that the very contrary of such an accusation would seem to be most true. The extravagant praise of the funeral eulogy has almost passed into a proverb.

No matter how much fault may be found with a man in his lifetime, – his death hushes the voice of criticism to a whisper, and friendship is allowed to proclaim all his virtues with trumpet tongue. – If this quotation I have made at all represents the habit of the past [illegible] dealing

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with the memory of the dead, then the world has grown not only more generous but more just.- For every man is entitled to be measured by his best trait or thought or deed. The blots upon his record,- who can tell, more than of the spots on the sun, whether they are some defect in his nature, or some treasonous circumstance through which his real ~~self~~ self cannot shine luminous as elsewhere.- But a distinction must be made between intelligent appreciation of the noblest quality of a life, and blind adulation of a name. What disturbs us most in the tributes paid to departed greatness, is their frequent attempt to attribute to it all the virtues in the calendar, in an indiscriminate mass of full blown perfection. Such panegyric is unfortunately too open mouthed in our day, and it fails as signally to teach and inculcate the lesson of a life, as does a jealous and malicious parade of its faults.

I have not refused to the gushing weakness of obituary libitation, simply for the purpose of pointing a recent exception to the rule. Though it is a noteworthy fact that among all the Resolutions and speeches by which men in all parts of the Commonwealth have testified their sorrow for the early death of Judge Wells and their appreciation of his life, not one sentence ~~could be said to appear~~ could be said to make an unwarranted

statement. I have seen almost everything which has appeared in print concerning him during their last two months, yet not one word that was not abundantly verified by my own impressions of his character and his capabilities. This shows that he impressed himself upon those who knew him, with remarkable clearness and power. He left in the memories of men a distinct image of himself; so that in speaking of him no one has used general and indiscriminate terms of praise, but all have spoken intelligently and sincerely, — as of a character distinctly apprehended. A noteworthy fact, — this, which teaches of itself that him was a life — worth more than some passing notice, even of serious and studious regard.

But I have referred to the common habit of saying everything good one can think of to say, about the dead, whether or no in strict justice they deserve it, chiefly for the purpose of proposing a truer method by which to estimate the significance of a life. The true estimate is not found in the balance between its virtues and its faults although the world has largely depended upon that supposition. A brave enemies, (if he have any) may be depended upon to bring all his errors and

failures to the light of day, and his friends may be equally trusted to give his good traits and successful achievements publicity. At first ~~but~~ blush it might be supposed that between the two something like justice would be done him in the end. - But this conclusion does not at all follow. For as has been said, no one is in position to judge of another, how far his failures are rooted in himself and how far due to circumstance. The only judgment which we can put does justice to ourselves, and the only one we are rightly entitled to pass upon another, is based upon the life's best fruit. - If your tree yields you but one perfect pear, you know that that represents its capability. Under proper conditions of soil and temperature and light the tree would produce all perfect pears. Moreover as truth and justice are one this is the only method of finding the lesson embodied in any biography.

In summing up the various good or bad points of a character we only talk around and about it. But when we reach its most notable feature and find how the man came to be that, we reach the heart and center of his character. In that will be found to center all the internal - that the man has awakened,

him

If anywhere in ~~him~~ is a thing we need to remember ~~and~~ or learn. it is his noblest quality and how he attained it.

It is useless to say that I shall make no attempt to balance accounts between the blemishes and excellencies of Judge Wells character, for I profess that to my eye one side of the account is altogether blank.- While the catalogue of his virtues is long, I neither know what ~~he~~ faults, ~~was~~ nor who can tell them to me. But I shall not attempt to rehearse the list of his virtues, considering - as I have said - that the true method is to seek the supreme characteristic of the man, and believing that the source of his greatest quality is the source and explanation of his whole character,

As man is partly the architect of his own fortunes and partly the creature of a fate which dwells in the past out of which he has sprung, his life illustrates two forces, viz. his own will, and that indefinite something called the spirit of the age to which he belongs.- The characters of prominent individuals are of great interest, considered simply as specimens & results of the civilization about them. The value & promise of New England thought and New England culture are gauged by their best fruit.

There was never a more genuine Son of

Massachusetts than John Wells, and not often one who better exemplifies the highest attainments of New England civilization. ~~Perh~~ Probably no class of people ever lived a more self-conscious life than the Puritans. That is to say; no people ever endeavored more strenuously or constantly to shape - by force of will - their every day life into consistency with an ideal. Perhaps nothing of the puritan character has survived in a more strongly marked degree than this habit of mind. Our ancestors to whom the church and the schoolhouse were as indispensable as their own habitations, created a mental atmosphere which stimulated earnest serious endeavor to attain ~~the~~ ~~Heaven~~ an ideal knowledge and righteousness. To this day if the New Englander has any distinctive character, it is that he depends less than the majority of his fellows upon outward circumstance and more resolutely than they takes his life into his own hands to guide according to his own best judgement. - In this respect Judge Wells ~~was~~ is a representative life; for those familiar with his earlier years say that in his youth he proposed to himself a very high moral standard, to which through every change, and in every station he made it his first business to conform himself. Those who knew him later in life do not need to be reminded that

with him the voice of conscience was the voice of supreme command. Now the New England shibboleth - "Culture", is to many minds suggestive of a very formal, - icy, stiff-necked and pharisaic character. There can be no doubt that the self-consciousness resulting from intense effort toward self-training is temporarily a very unlovely and uncomfortable frame of mind. - One can have few more dreadful experiences than to pass some time with a family to whom wealth or social position is new. All the aims by which the household is managed are so painfully apparent; there is so much of assumed magnificence, such evident nervousness lest something may be done amiss; there is in a word so little of either unconscious freedom or polished ease, that the visitor is made to feel like a condemned prisoner. So when a people puts itself into severe training for some higher excellence, most of the unconscious grace of childhood, most of the heartiness and spontaneity the romance and poetry of ~~idler living~~ departs from it. — It becomes egotistic, pedantic, ~~egotistic~~ reserved, uncouth, ascetic, superstitious in its observance of formal rules, intolerant of amusements, (and whether she a Cavalier of the dandy fourth order, dancing attendance upon the Court of Charles Stuart would have been likely to ~~be~~ charge upon a Roundhead of the

the same era. - These things in various milder or harsher shades have been standing accusations against the people of New England, and they have been not altogether unmerited. If culture ends in the production of this stamp of character, if it must be maintained as well as won by the constant watchfulness and consciousness of self - then it is a grave question whether culture adds to the sum of human happiness. But no process should be judged at a half way stage, and the great feature in the life of Judge Wells, is its promise that the full result of our New England Methods, such again the grace and beauty of unconscious or spontaneous living. - I never met that man in whom thought ~~whom~~ self appeared to occupy a less prominent place. - ~~Could not be made~~ any thought of himself or what he was doing - never obtruded the ~~that~~ slightest shadow into his conversation unless by special effort the subject was called forth. - I never met a man in whom modesty was a more genuine or unaffected trait. He was modest even to the very verge of bashfulness. I have been told that when a young man he suffered from his shrinking to go into society, and only by an effort of his will ever prevailed upon himself to take a position subjecting him to public notice.

He was a man of most generous and kindly impulses, flowing out toward those from whom he could expect no return for a kindness.- If there were any doubt whether he was altogether swayed by the coldest sense of duty- or whether compassion and pity had any great place in his heart, this fact would resolve the doubt; that he once left his bed in the nighttime, and descended into the rain to relieve the distress of some chickens who had become separated from their mother. So open was his heart to the smallest cry of distress.- His perfectly unconstrained and easy bearing, the absence of everything stiff or formal in his manner, which no one could fail to remark, may testify how little of art and how much of impulse controlled his daily life.- He thoroughly enjoyed amusements and recreations of no limited range. In fact it would be hard to find in any man less of the asceticism commonly associated with the Puritan character. He enjoyed life to the very last, with the keen relish of a child. I know not if he were ever visited by gloomy or despondent though
thoughts.- But I have seen him when anxieties heavily
were pressing upon him, I never saw a cloud upon him through which his good feeling did not as perceptibly shine as sunshine through a scattering April shower.

These qualities are not rare, Great hearted generous and impulsive men, ~~are~~, if not as "plenty as blackberries" do still exist in sufficient numbers, to be called common phenomena. But this is rare; to find a warm, affectionate, nature - a life of transparent simplicity coupled with a high degree of culture and the most perfect self command.- In the symmetrical cultivation of the intellect, and the schooling of the passions, the emotional side of life must necessarily sink into abeyance for a time. It is only when the culture of the whole nature is carried to a very high pitch of excellence, that men can attain again ~~to~~ the child like unconsciousness of self, at the same time that they possess entire control of all their faculties. In a refined and genial way Judge Wells had all the warmth and spontaneity of soul which delights the Western man. But when the latter would be swept off his feet by a gust of passion, Judge Wells stood calm and self possessed,- whereas restrained impulse is tied down to a very narrow range of ~~en~~ enjoyment and performance, he had at command a wide extent of pleasure, and was fully equipped for an undertaking upon any intellectual field.-- Such a character is of incomparable value to us, as proof that the New England Ideal is the highest for which

any people have lived, and will bear fruit of the very highest type of human character. —

But as man acquires cultivation and self control he ceases to be the entire product of social forces and traditions surrounding him, and becomes himself a judge of what he will be & do. The quality of his will, the purity of his motives, the strength of his reason, are therefore more and more tested, as he becomes a cultured being. — In his natural state he is completely the slave of senior powers. Civilization puts his will in some partial or complete command of instinct and circumstance. The most civilized man is not only a result of the Spirit of his age, but more truly an original source of the power which shapes public spirit and thought. As such therefore every great personage must be an interesting study; and if I am right in calling Judge Wells an eminently self-trained, self-cultured man, we should be prepared to find him a man of vast influence among his fellows. — That it was — that I think no one will call in question. — It is not necessary that a man's name should figure largely in the newspapers, or that he should deluge the community with talk — in order to give

him weight in public affairs. Indeed it will generally hold true that the newspaper heroes are mere lay figures.— The power which compels the tidal wave, is not heralded by any flourish of trumpets, nor does it act through any complicated system of boosting like that by which a man gets himself elected to Congress.— So We shall find that molten thought and character-communicating its influence outwardly through a narrow circle of friends — as ripples float out from some central disturbance of a sheet of water,— will reach further and will have more power to quicken activity in the social mass, than any number of insects skating smoothly over its surface.— In a quiet unostentatious way Judge Wells made himself of great weight in this community — and the commonwealth. And this no-one will deny.—

What is the explanation of this fact? By virtue of what quality did his opinion always command respect? And what drew to him the many, who from all classes and in all straits sought his counsel? These questions can be satisfactorily answered, not by any summary of his many qualifications for the positions of leader - judge or discriminator, and friend — but only by a perception of his highest and purest trait, that which pervaded

and colored his whole character.

The whole life of the man was broadly based upon his moral or religious nature, - and that I take to be the most prominent fact about him - His intellect, his affections and desires were always subject to his feeling of duty, and the degree to which conscience ruled his thought and action, made him a very remarkable man.

Though * in a purely intellectual Estimate he would not appear great ~~taken~~ above many eminent men in his profession. Still being possessed of an original sense of right & wrong, it gave him something of an intuitive perceptive power, which emancipated his judgment from blind obedience to precedent, and ~~made~~ it often of more value. - His reasoning faculties were of a kind so fine and compact, & that many a famous logician, book in his study shut, would appear small in comparison with him.

Perhaps the strength of his religious life, and its influence upon his character, may be best illustrated by the entire genuineness, and integrity of his nature. - As man, says that bit of worldly wisdom is a hero to his own valet; which is another way of saying that every great reputation is a painted show, like the canvass palace of the stage, whose artificial nature is fully revealed to those behind the scenes.

Now undoubtedly the painted imitations are

more numerous than the Solid reality.
But notwithstanding the skepticism of an
actor who has seen only theatrical royalty,
we should know that there are real Kings
and Kingly Mansions, or the imitations never
would have had existence. So despite the bubble
reputations blown by skillful conjurors, we
ought to know that some true greatness walks
this earth, or there were nothing for demagogues
to imitate. There are men who are most
heroic to those who know them best, even as
there are palaces whose rich treasures are
only known within familiar limits. There
are lives which need no artificial light to
conceal their shabby magnificence, but bear the
closest inspection in the broad blaze of open
day. Such an one was the life of Judge Wells.
One might safely challenge any person to say
that a closer acquaintance with him ever resulted in
disappointment, — that one ever penetrated
behind an appearance in his life to find deception
and unreality. The man who assumes
a virtue when he has it not, trusts not
in virtue but in his own cunning. The
man who makes it his business to be what
he would seem, knows that nothing worth
possessing is to be secured by a knavish trick.

The manhood of Judge Wells was genuine at every point. How thoroughly real and massive in its strength, it needed something more than business acquaintance to appreciate. In talking with him one was surprised again and again to find how wide and deep, how far outside of mere traditionary channels his thinking had extended. Many people reveal weaknesses to their intimate friends, of which the world does not suspect them. But I am fully prepared to say that this man from his earliest years, & disposed no more faults to the view of those immediately about him, than to the eye of society.

This amounts to an open declaration that his faith in God and the right, was the corner stone of his character and the support of his fair name. Religion was with him, a life not a mass of forms, and as a vital religion always will, proved itself the strongest element in his own nature, and the source of his power over others.

The influence of such a man flows wide among his fellows, & nor do I hesitate to say that it leaves the deepest impress man can make upon his age. In this literary era, we have come to think that about the only way of leaving any influence behind us is to write a book.

But the man of whom of all the world has

been most felt in human affairs. left behind him not one written word. Why can we not understand that what we inscribe upon the ~~souls~~ mind with which we come in contact is the dearest most enduring record we can make. We may any of us give ourselves up to the task of setting forth in language the beauty of righteousness and we shall not do so much to lift men above the tricks of policy and expediency as has been done by the daily life of this one pure-faithful and upright soul. When we have seen what life is anchored to a faith in God, and wholly bent upon obedience to his will, then do we know that there is something better than money-getting, place-hunting "smartness", some higher reward than the applause of men. — Put that worldly skepticism which looks upon religion and morality mainly as an outworn prejudice, side by side with the life of John Wells, and what a ghastly appearance it makes! Contrast the so called genius which now & again thrusts its way into high place, with the calm poise of his religious soul, and what a hollow sham it is!

Considered on the one hand as the fruit of New England Culture, — and on the other as one of the sources whence New England life derives its character. Judge Wells was

a remarkable man:- one whose life well deserves to be studied, and whose memory will live with power in the minds of all who knew him;- What he was to this Club it is useless to attempt to say. Let it suffice that upon our records stands no name of which we ~~*~~ have justly come to feel prouder, none more intimately associated with pleasant, ennobling remembrances - nor less ~~suggestive~~ suggestive of unpretentious social intercourse. Then that which stands first upon the roll of our dead. the name of John Wells. ———

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